



## Reclaiming the Sword: Cinematic and Literary Representations of Indian Women Warriors from the Medieval to the Colonial Era

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### Abstract

This paper examines the representation of Indian women warriors in literature and film, with a focus on medieval and colonial-era figures including Rani Durgavati of Gondwana (c. 1524–1564), Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi (1828–1858), Onake Obavva of Chitradurga (c. eighteenth century), Abbakka Chowta of Ullal (c. sixteenth century), and the tribal warrior Jhalkari Bai. Drawing on postcolonial feminist theory, literary historiography, and cultural studies, it contends that these women have been acknowledged in folk poetry, bardic traditions, regional literature, and vernacular chronicles, yet marginalized within dominant colonial and nationalist histories. The study investigates how post-Independence literary works, including historical novels in Hindi, Marathi, Kannada, and English, have contributed to recovering these figures from the periphery of official history. It further analyzes the ideological tensions inherent in this recovery, including those between nationalism and feminism, caste erasure and Dalit reclamation, and heroic mythologization and historical complexity. Ultimately, the paper situates this literary revival within the broader context of gender, memory, and national identity in contemporary India.

**Keywords:** Indian Women Warriors, Rani Lakshmibai, Rani Durgavati, Jhalkari Bai, Postcolonial Feminism, Historical Fiction, Bardic Tradition, Gender And Nationalism, Literary Recovery, Dalit Women Warriors

### 1. Introduction

The Indian woman warrior occupies a paradoxical position within the cultural imagination of the subcontinent. She is simultaneously celebrated and marginalized, appearing in nationalist rhetoric and folk memory, yet often absent from the official literary and historical canon shaped by colonial scholarship and only partially revised by postcolonial historiography. Bardic verses commemorating Rani Durgavati's final stand in 1564, extensive literature on Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi's role in the 1857 uprising, and oral traditions preserving figures such as Onake Obavva and Abbakka Chowta demonstrate that Indian women warriors have inspired a diverse array of literary, dramatic, and cinematic works, much oSince Independence, a significant revival of interest in these figures has emerged across multiple literary traditions. Historical novels, epic poems, dramatic monologues, and biographical narratives in various Indian languages and in English have revisited medieval and colonial-era

women warriors, aiming not only to honor them as national heroines but also to interrogate the politics of their historical memory. This revival is politically charged, as the literary reclamation of women warriors intersects with competing narratives of nationalism, caste, religion, and feminism, thereby reflecting the complex politics of gender and identity in contemporary India. The complex politics of gender and identity. This paper analyzes the literary representation of Indian women warriors from the medieval to the colonial era, with particular attention to the development of a post-Independence tradition of recovery and reclamation. The analysis addresses four key areas: pre-colonial bardic and folk traditions that initially depicted these women warriors; the colonial period's partial recognition and systematic marginalization; the post-Independence literary revival and its ideological complexities; and the specific case of Dalit women warriors, particularly Jhalkari Bai, whose recovery has been driven by Dalit literary movements rather than mainstream nationalist culture. This study is situated within postcolonial feminist theory and the emerging field of gender and memory studies in South Asian literary criticism.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1 Postcolonial Feminism and the Archive of Warrior Women**

This study draws upon postcolonial feminist scholarship and the critical historiography of gender and memory. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1988) question, 'Can the subaltern speak?', is particularly pertinent to the analysis of women warriors. Although their agency was acknowledged in folk and bardic traditions, colonial historiography frequently sentimentalized or marginalized these figures. As Antoinette Burton (2003) observes, the colonial archive is not neutral; its contents reflect imperial priorities and Victorian gender assumptions.

The colonial archive distorted the histories of women warriors in medieval and colonial India in three principal ways. First, their military and political roles were recognized only when these narratives supported colonial interests. For instance, Rani Lakshmbai was portrayed as a tragic heroine in British accounts, her defeat reinforcing British supremacy rather than acknowledging her resistance as a political act. Second, the caste backgrounds of women warriors were systematically erased. Figures such as Jhalkari Bai, a Dalit leader in the defense of Jhansi, were omitted from colonial records and only partially acknowledged in nationalist histories. Third, women warriors from regional and tribal backgrounds, including Rani Durgavati of the Gond kingdom and Abbakka Chowta of Ullal, were rendered invisible by the colonial focus on select regions and dynasties.

### **2.2 Memory, Literature, and the Recovery of Suppressed Histories**

The post-Independence literary revival of women warriors can be analyzed using Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of 'DissemiNation,' which emphasizes counter-narratives that contest dominant national histories. Feminist literary historians, including Susie Tharu and K. Lalita (1991), contend that recovering suppressed women's literary and historical traditions is transformative and necessitates a re-evaluation of existing frameworks rather than merely incorporating women into them. Thus, reclaiming women warriors in post-Independence literature requires a fundamental reassessment of the criteria for historical and literary analysis. Nancy Fraser's (1990) concept of 'subaltern counterpublics,' which refers to parallel arenas where subordinated groups generate counter-discourses to dominant narratives, is also pertinent. Bardic traditions, folk songs, and regional vernacular literatures that preserved the memory of women warriors functioned as such counterpublics. These cultural forms sustained alternative historical perspectives and established the foundation for the post-Independence literary revival.

### 3. Pre-Colonial Bardic and Folk Literary Traditions

#### 3.1 Rani Durgavati in Bundeli and Gond Oral Tradition

Rani Durgavati (c. 1524–1564), a Chandela princess and later queen of Gondwana, led her kingdom's resistance to Mughal expansion until her death in battle against Asaf Khan. She is among the most widely commemorated women warriors in pre-colonial Indian literature. Bundeli and Gond oral traditions have preserved her legacy for centuries, creating a substantial literary record. Bardic compositions in the Bundeli dialect highlight her martial skill, administrative ability, and determination, presenting these qualities within Rajput and tribal warrior traditions.

The Durgavati tradition in Gond oral literature is significant because it offers a distinct perspective on her legacy, distinct from the Hindu-nationalist interpretation of her legacy after Independence. Gond oral accounts portray Durgavati not as a Hindu queen resisting a Muslim invader, but as a Gond queen defending her kingdom's territorial sovereignty against Mughal expansion. This framing reflects the Gond community's historical consciousness, which prioritises tribal sovereignty over religious identity. As a result, literary interpretations of Durgavati must balance the tribal-sovereigntist perspective of Gond oral tradition with the dominant Hindu-nationalist narrative found in most post-Independence literature.

#### 3.2 Abbakka Chowta and the Tulu Bardic Tradition

Abbakka Chowta (c. sixteenth century), the Tuluva (an ethnolinguistic group native to the coastal southwestern part of India) queen of Ullal who led sustained military resistance against Portuguese colonial incursions on the southwestern coast of India, is most extensively commemorated in the yakshagana performance tradition of coastal Karnataka. Yakshagana, a traditional theatre form involving dance, music, elaborate costumes, and narrative poetry, has served as the principal medium of historical memory for the Tulu-speaking communities of the Karnataka coast. Its portrayals of Abbakka represent one of the most enduring pre-colonial literary treatments of an Indian woman warrior.

Building on this tradition, within yakshagana, Abbakka emerges as a figure of considerable complexity: she is depicted as a military commander, a political administrator adept at navigating the intricate inter-dynastic politics of sixteenth-century South India, and a woman whose personal life—including a conflicted marriage to the Nayaka of Mangalore, who allegedly betrayed her to the Portuguese—is intricately woven into the narrative. This dramatic sophistication challenges any simplistic heroic idealisation. The yakshagana portrayal of Abbakka resists reduction to either a sanctified or one-dimensional warrior; instead, she is presented as a political actor whose resistance to Portuguese colonialism is inseparable from the nuanced social and familial dynamics of her historical context.

#### 3.3 Onake Obavva in the Kannada Folk Tradition

The legend of Onake Obavva, the wife of a guard at Chitradurga fort who single-handedly repelled an attack by Hyder Ali through a narrow passage using only an onake (a wooden pestle for pounding grain), occupies a distinctive position in Kannada literary and folk traditions. In contrast to figures such as Durgavati or Lakshmibai, Onake Obavva was neither a queen nor a noblewoman, but rather an ordinary individual whose heroism emerged spontaneously in response to a crisis, utilizing the only tool at her disposal. This ordinariness is central to her legend, emphasising that exceptional heroism is not confined to royalty. The tradition of Onake Obavva is maintained primarily through folk songs, regional school curricula, and local theatrical performances, rather than through the high literary tradition. Its sustained presence

underscores the significance of vernacular educational institutions and community practices in preserving historical memory beyond the official canon. The literary importance of this tradition resides in both its content and its medium: folk songs and community performances function as forms of women's literary culture, transmitted mainly within women's social networks and domestic rituals.

#### **4. The Colonial Period: Partial Acknowledgment and Systematic Erasure**

##### **4.1 Rani Lakshmibai and the Politics of Colonial Representation**

Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi (1828–1858) has generated a more extensive body of literary and historical scholarship than any other Indian woman warrior, and her narrative exemplifies the complexities inherent in colonial literary representation. British accounts of the 1857 uprising, ranging from official reports to Victorian fiction, acknowledged her military prowess with a combination of admiration and apprehension. General Hugh Rose famously described her as 'the most dangerous of all Indian leaders,' a characterization that illustrates the colonial perspective, while her leadership was formidable. In contrast, the nationalist literary tradition of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries reimagined Lakshmibai to serve emerging political objectives. Subhadra Kumari Chauhan's Hindi poem *Jhansi ki Rani* (1930), which remains widely taught in Indian schools, was instrumental in establishing Lakshmibai as a nationalist icon. This poem presents her as an embodiment of Hindu martial valour and anti-colonial resistance, a perspective that has shaped subsequent literary representations more than historical narratives. A perspective that has influenced later literary portrayals more than historical accounts.

*Bundele Harbolon ke munh hamne suni kahani thi / Khoob ladi mardani woh to Jhansi wali Rani thi. (From the lips of Bundela bards we heard the tale / She fought like a man, that Queen of Jhansi.) — Subhadra Kumari Chauhan, Jhansi ki Rani, 1930*

Chauhan's poem is notable for both its content and its form. By attributing narrative authority to the 'Bundela bards,' it recognizes the bardic oral tradition as the source of Lakshmibai's legend and transforms this tradition into a modern nationalist literary text. This formal choice exemplifies the process of literary recovery and transformation examined in this paper throughout the post-Independence period.

##### **4.2 The Erasure of Jhalkari Bai**

Lakshmibai's literary representation reflects the selective acknowledgment typical of colonial and nationalist historiography. In contrast, the near-complete omission of Jhalkari Bai, a Dalit woman soldier who served under Lakshmibai and played a key role in defending the fort, highlights the systematic exclusions in these narratives. Jhalkari Bai's story, preserved through oral tradition in the Kori (weaver) community, provides an important account of Dalit women's military agency. Because she closely resembled Lakshmibai, she reportedly disguised herself as the queen to mislead British forces, enabling Lakshmibai's escape and surrendering herself in the queen's place.

This narrative remained absent from both colonial and mainstream national historiography for over a century. Its recovery began with Dalit literary movements in the 1990s, rather than mainstream literary culture. Dalit writer Mola Ram Verma produced the first comprehensive literary account of Jhalkari Bai's story. Later, poets and novelists in the Dalit literary tradition positioned her as a central figure in a counter-history of 1857 that emphasises caste solidarity and Dalit agency over Hindu nationalist martial valour.

## 5. Post-Independence Literary Revival: Recovery and Its Tensions

### 5.1 The Historical Novel as Instrument of Recovery

The historical novel, composed in languages such as Hindi, Marathi, Bengali, Kannada, and English, has served as the primary literary medium for post-Independence writers revisiting medieval and colonial-era women warriors. By integrating historical documentation with imaginative reconstruction, this genre is particularly effective for recovery projects. It recognizes the limitations of historical records while investigating the inner lives and motivations that official historiography often neglects. Nevertheless, the creative freedom inherent in the historical novel introduces ideological risks. Although it facilitates empathetic reconstruction, it may also result in anachronistic projections, such as the imposition of contemporary feminist perspectives on historical figures who inhabited distinct conceptual frameworks.

Vrindavanlal Varma's novel *Jhansi ki Rani Lakshmibai* (1946), among the earliest and most influential post-Independence historical novels to focus on a woman warrior, exemplifies both the potential and the limitations of the genre. In Varma's portrayal, Lakshmibai emerges as a fully realized historical figure rather than merely a nationalist symbol. Her political acumen, relationships with advisors and soldiers, and complex negotiations with both the British and Indian princely states are depicted with historical specificity. However, the novel is also shaped by the nationalist politics prevalent at the time of its composition. Published the year before Independence, it emphasizes Lakshmibai's anti-colonial agency in ways that serve a particular political agenda.

### 5.2 Durgavati in Post-Independence Hindi Literature

Rani Durgavati has been a prominent subject in post-Independence Hindi literature. Vrindavanlal Varma's novel *Garh Kunder* (1945) and subsequent dramatic and poetic works feature her prominently. The authors use their characters to explore issues of gender, dynastic sovereignty, and resistance to imperial expansion. These themes are important to discourses on nation-building in the postcolonial context. The kingdom of Gondwana, located in present-day Madhya Pradesh, was historically a Gond tribal state. Its depiction in literature raises critical questions about tribal sovereignty and the Hindu-nationalist framing of anti-Mughal resistance.

The Gond literary tradition's own representations of Durgavati are preserved in folk songs, oral narratives, and community performances. These form a significant counter-text to the dominant Hindi literary tradition. The Gond literary tradition presents its own accounts of Durgavati through folk songs, oral stories, and performances. This offers a significant alternative to mainstream Hindi literature. Hindi novels often depict her resistance as part of a Hindu-nationalist defence against Mughal expansion. Gond oral traditions emphasise her role in protecting Gond territory and cultural autonomy. Recent Adivasi literary movements have brought more visibility to this perspective. They challenge the mainstream appropriation of Durgavati's legacy.

### 5.3 Feminist Revisions and Counter-Narratives

Since the 1980s, feminist writers in India have re-examined stories of women warriors. Their work questions both the nationalist myths found in post-Independence literature and the lingering colonial attitudes of earlier portrayals. These feminist perspectives focus on aspects that male-centred traditions often ignored, such as the social limits placed on women in patriarchal settings, the unique risks women faced in military life, and the ways women navigated male-dominated political and military systems.

Mahasweta Devi's historical fiction, while not only about women warriors, sets a

strong example for feminist revisionism. She blends careful research with creative storytelling and pays close attention to caste and class in her work. This approach has shaped how later feminist writers portray women warriors. Authors like Mrinal Pande in Hindi and Shashi Deshpande in English have explored the inner worlds of historical women with more psychological depth and feminist awareness than earlier works.

## **6. Dalit Literary Reclamation: Jhalkari Bai and the Politics of Caste Memory**

The recovery of Jhalkari Bai by Dalit writers and intellectuals represents a politically significant development in post-Independence literature on Indian women warriors. For more than a century, her narrative persisted solely within the oral tradition of the Kori community and remained absent from official records. Through the efforts of the Dalit literary movement, Jhalkari Bai has been transformed from a figure of local memory into a national symbol, thereby foregrounding Dalit military service and revealing the caste-based exclusion of Dalit contributions to the 1857 resistance.

Jhalkari Bai's literary rehabilitation has encompassed multiple genres. Mola Ram Verma's biographical poem, initially published in regional Dalit journals, initiated this process. Subsequently, Kanpur-based novelist Bhuvan Vikram authored a detailed historical novel grounded in oral tradition. The 2019 film *Jhalkari Bai*, directed by Satish Motilal Rajput, further expanded her narrative into cinema, demonstrating the interplay between literary and cinematic representation examined in this study.

The reclamation of Jhalkari Bai underscores broader challenges in the literary recovery of women warriors. Her omission from mainstream nationalist literature was structural, reflecting caste hierarchies that rendered Dalit contributions invisible. The Dalit literary movement's recovery of her narrative constitutes both an act of historical justice and a critique of the literary canon, demonstrating that the recognition of women warriors necessitates confronting caste in post-Independence Indian literary culture.

## **7. Conclusion**

The literary representation of Indian women warriors from the medieval to the colonial era is a rich, politically complex, and still underexplored field of scholarly inquiry. These representations are not straightforward acts of historical recovery. Instead, they serve as interventions in the politics of gender, caste, religion, and national identity. Bardic traditions first inscribed figures such as Rani Durgavati, Abbakka Chowta, and Onake Obavva in literary memory, encoding specific communal and regional views. Post-Independence literary culture has often overwritten these perspectives with nationalist or Hindu majoritarian frameworks. The colonial period's ambivalent acknowledgement of Rani Lakshmibai both recognised and domesticated her agency. The post-Independence literary revival has produced texts of historical and imaginative richness, but it has also reproduced ideological tensions that need critical scrutiny.

A significant recent development in this literary history is the Dalit literary movement's recovery of Jhalkari Bai and other Dalit women warriors. Unlike the mainstream literary canon's selective commemoration, this recovery actively challenges exclusionary remembering and compels a re-examination of the frameworks through which Indian women warriors have been represented. The Dalit reclamation continues the broader impulse underlying all recovery work, but it stands out by directly refusing to accept the silences of the dominant archive as definitive in determining historical significance.

For scholars of Indian literature, feminist literary history, and postcolonial studies,

the literary tradition of Indian women warriors is a valuable lens. It helps examine the layered politics of gender, caste, religion, and national identity. The sword wielded by these women in history has often been reclaimed by the literary imagination. Sometimes, this serves nationalist myths. Other times, it challenges caste hierarchy or articulates feminist counter-narratives. A comprehensive understanding of these literary reclamations is essential for interpreting the histories they invoke and the cultural politics they reflect.

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## Cite this Article

***"Prity Jha" "Reclaiming the Sword: Cinematic and Literary Representations of Indian Women Warriors from the Medieval to the Colonial Era"***, Research Vidyapith International Multidisciplinary Journal, ISSN: 3048-7331 (Online), Volume:2, Issue:12, December 2025.

**Journal URL-** <https://www.researchvidyapith.com/>

**DOI-** 10.70650/rvimj.2025v2i12005

**Published Date-** 04 December 2025

